

USDAnews

USDA's Employee News Publication—For You & About You!

Tom Vilsack Takes The Helm As Our 30th Secretary

by Ron Hall

Office of Communications

Tom Vilsack became the 30th Secretary of Agriculture in USDA's 147-year history on January 20, 2009, following his confirmation by the U.S. Senate. He was then sworn in, along with six other individuals, by Vice President **Joe Biden** on January 21, as part of a group swearing-in ceremony of those seven Senate-confirmed nominees for their respective Cabinet-level positions.

On January 22, his third day as Secretary, Vilsack spoke to USDA employees who had gathered in the Patio of USDA's Whitten Building in Washington, DC to welcome him. In his remarks, the former two-term Democratic Governor of Iowa noted that his predecessor, Secretary **Ed Schafer**, had followed a tradition practiced by many departing public officials. Schafer had written his successor a personal letter.

"Here's in part what he wrote about you," Vilsack recounted. "He said: 'USDA is a great Department. You are inheriting a caring, committed, and capable workforce who will respond to your leadership and direction.'"

"That's well-deserved praise," Vilsack told his audience. "From afar I know that you all *are* dedicated, and concerned about this

country and those who work the land. And I share that concern."

Vilsack, who is 58, was born on Dec. 13, 1950 in Pittsburgh, PA and placed in an orphanage shortly thereafter. He was then adopted in 1951 and was raised by his adoptive parents in Pittsburgh. He received a bachelor's degree from Hamilton College in Clinton, NY in 1972 and earned a law degree from Albany Law School in New York in 1975. He then moved to Mount Pleasant, IA—the hometown of his wife **Christie**—where he practiced law. He served as mayor of Mount Pleasant, beginning in 1987, and went on to serve two terms.

Vilsack was elected to the State Senate in Iowa where he served from 1993-98. He was elected Governor of Iowa in 1998 and went on to serve two four-year terms. Prior to his confirmation as USDA Secretary he worked as a lawyer in Des Moines, IA.

While serving as Governor of Iowa Vilsack created the Iowa Food Policy Council to advance local food systems, enhance family farm profitability, and combat hunger and malnutrition. He led trade missions to foreign countries to market agricultural products and attended the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization to push for expanded agricultural trade negotiations. He started Vision Iowa, a program to invest in cultural and recreation-
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Tom Vilsack (right) takes the oath of office to become the 30th Secretary of Agriculture during a group swearing-in ceremony conducted by Vice President **Joe Biden** (left) on January 21. Vilsack was one of seven individuals whose nominations for Cabinet-level positions had been confirmed on the previous day, January 20, by the U.S. Senate. Also being sworn in with Vilsack are (beginning second from left) **Steven Chu**, Secretary of Energy; **Arne Duncan**, Secretary of Education; **Janet Napolitano**, Secretary of Homeland Security; **Peter Orszag**, Director of the Office of Management and Budget; **Ken Salazar**, Secretary of the Interior; and **Eric Shinseki**, Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Note the story on this page.—**PHOTO BY LUIGI CIUFFEGELLI**

Here's How The Reorganization Of Our Ethics Program Looks, Following Its First Year

by Ron Hall

Office of Communications

It's been a little over a year since USDA's Ethics Program was officially reorganized. So, how has it been working since then?

"All in all, pretty well, I think," replied **Ray Sheehan**, Director of the Department's Office of Ethics.

And, while any story about any reorganization anywhere is generally likely to serve as a surecure for insomnia, "this reorganization was really needed,"

Sheehan emphasized.

As detailed in Secretary's Memorandum 1030-065, dated Feb. 1, 2008 and titled "Reorganization of the Departmental Administration Office of Ethics," USDA officially did what that title declared. Specifically, first it combined and centralized USDA's various agency-level and mission area-level ethics programs into one unified USDA Ethics Program under the Office of Ethics.

Second, it restructured the

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Tom Vilsack *Secretary of Agriculture*

Dear Fellow Employees, Before my predecessor and fellow former governor **Ed Schafer** departed USDA, he followed a tradition practiced by many departing public officials. He wrote me—his successor—a personal letter.

In his letter he wrote, in part, that “USDA is a great Department. You are inheriting a caring, committed, and capable workforce who will respond to your leadership and direction.”

I think that’s well-deserved and well-earned praise. Even before I joined this Department I already knew that USDA employees—located across the country and around the world—are a dedicated group of public servants. You are concerned about this country, those who work the land, and the millions of consumers who depend on our work three times a day. I share these concerns.

While I was practicing law in Iowa, I had the extraordinary privilege and honor of representing farmers during a very difficult time in my State—the Farm Crisis of the 1980s. During that time, I got a real sense of those who work the land, and learned the value system that is at the core of what rural America is all about. That is what all of you, in one form or another, are dedicating yourselves to—creating a real sense of opportunity in rural communities. It’s about maintaining the prosperity of rural communities, and returning a sense of hope and opportunity to rural America. It is important and noble work.

There are literally millions of people whose lives depend on your work, and they may never have the opportunity to personally thank you for what you’re doing. So I want to say ‘thank you’ for the work that you do. And I want to impress upon you how interested I am in learning about your work, leading this Department, and ensuring that you receive the recognition you deserve as true public servants.

But I also want you to know how much I need your help. I have experience governing the State of Iowa, and I know the broad parameters of many of the programs you all are involved in. But I will never know as much as each of you knows about the individual work you do.

So we need to have a strong partnership. These will not be easy times. There will be tough choices and there will be some difficult and painful decisions. But we have the opportunity to create a new 21st century economy in America, an economy that really speaks to the strengths and values of those who work in rural America, an economy that’s based on innovation and hard work. We have the opportunity to increase the number of revenue opportunities available to farmers, to grow our way toward energy independence, and to improve the diets, health, and wellness of millions of schoolchildren. This is an important time for USDA.

We’ll need to figure out how to leverage, focus, and target resources in a way that allows us to generate the best return for people in this country in terms of job growth and economic prosperity, particularly in rural communities. At the same time, we’ll be looking at ways in which we can improve our services, with the resources that we have. I know you’ve done a lot of that already—but it’s a job that never ends.

So I have this commitment to each of you: I will do everything I can to be a good listener, to learn from you, and to provide you a clear understanding of what our vision is for USDA. We are going to be aggressive and progressive, and I hope that you’ll join me in that journey.

I want the entire country to know and appreciate what you do every day—and I want them to understand the significance of what you do. If we all do our jobs well, I’m sure America will have a greater appreciation, and a feeling of gratitude, for the people of USDA. ■

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Office of Ethics by creating a Headquarters Office with four newly-established Branch Offices. The Headquarters Office was set up to serve USDA’s political staffs, Departmental Staff Offices, the Risk Management Agency, the National Finance Center, and the Foreign Agricultural Service. The Science Ethics Branch was created to serve all career personnel within the Research, Education, and Economics Mission Area, as well as designated science-related organizations within the Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The Farm, Conservation, and Rural Programs Branch was set up to serve all career personnel in the Farm Service Agency, NRCS (other than those served by the Science Ethics Branch), and the Rural Development Mission Area.

The Marketing, Regulatory, and Nutrition Branch was to serve all career personnel in the Marketing and Regulatory Programs Mission Area, the Food Safety Mission Area, and the Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services Mission Area. Finally, the Forestry Services Branch was to handle all career Forest Service employees, other than those served by the Science Ethics Branch.

So, why was this done? As stated in the Secretary’s Memo, “The decision to reorganize the USDA Ethics Program under [USDA’s Office of Ethics] was based upon identified weaknesses in the long-established, agency/mission area-based structure of the USDA Ethics Program per two separate [U.S. Office of Government Ethics] audits in 1997 and 2002.”

According to the Secretary’s Memo, the centralization of

USDA’s Ethics Program was designed to result in “direct program accountability to the Designated Agency Ethics Official... who will be directly responsible for all aspects of the USDA Ethics Program, including the selection, training, and supervision of all USDA ethics personnel; [plus] greater continuity of services and uniformity of advice; [plus] a higher standard of ethics advice available to USDA employees. The [Branches] will bring together advisors whose agencies face similar issues, as well as providing greater coverage and continuity of services.”

“Look, prior to this reorganization a year ago, among federal ethics programs, the previous Ethics Program here at USDA was unique—and not always in a positive sense,” Sheehan acknowledged. “At the time USDA’s

Ethics Program was highly decentralized and under-supported in most agency programs.”

“In addition,” he pointed out, “our previous USDA Ethics Program had, frankly, been identified as having a number of weaknesses in such areas as advisor credibility, advisor quality, program accountability, lack of information technology—or IT—coordination, functional conflicts in duties, low program visibility, and lack of support personnel.”

“So we needed to address those problems—and we believe this reorganization is doing that—albeit slowly but surely,” Sheehan continued. “It’s like any new organization finding its sealegs. We think that—in addition to consolidating and centralizing the ethics advisory functions within the Department—the current... *continued on pg. 7...*

Notes *from USDA Headquarters*

"The People's Garden":

"Now, you've heard of paving over farmlands. Well, we're taking a reverse action today...reclaiming this patch of earth with an asphalt breaking."

With those words Secretary **Tom Vilsack** drove a jackhammer into a plot of asphalt. This particular plot was located on the corner of USDA's Whitten Building in Washington, DC. It was also adjacent to a currently existing USDA garden.

And that's part of the point: Vilsack was helping to eliminate unnecessary asphalt and, in turn, add 612 square feet of planted space to that existing garden. The result is to be known as USDA's People's Garden. It's no accident that this event took place on February 12—the 200th birthday of President **Abraham Lincoln**, who founded USDA in 1862 and who referred to it as "The People's Department."

Vilsack noted that "The People's Garden" would grow an assortment of fruits and vegetables to symbolize USDA's commitment to providing healthy diets for children, as well as to fight childhood obesity.

In addition, the new garden is to eliminate 1,250 square feet of unnecessary paved surface and return the landscape to grass. "The changes signal a removal of impervious surfaces and improvement in water management that is needed throughout the Chesapeake Bay Watershed," advised Natural Resources Conservation Services Landscape Architect **Bob Snieckus**.

Marian Romero, the Building Concessions Supervisor in the Office of Operations, said the site is already being enriched by compost from the Agricultural Research Service's Beltsville Agricultural Research Center Composting Facility. "That compost," she emphasized, "is being made

in part from food and biobased cafeteria-ware discards from USDA cafeterias."

Romero added that during last summer's "Summer Harvest" food drive, the Department provided, to an area food bank, more than 700 pounds of fresh vegetables which had been harvested from the existing garden at that site.

At the ceremony Vilsack also announced the goal of creating a community garden at each USDA facility worldwide.

2007 Ag Census:

USDA released the results of the 2007 Census of Agriculture on February 4, and the findings reflected that the number of farms in the U.S. has grown four percent and the operators of those farms have become more diverse in the past five years.

According to **Bob Bass**, Director of the Census and Survey Division in the National Agricultural Statistics Service—the agency which conducts the Census of Agriculture every five years—the 2007 Census of Agriculture counted 2,204,792 farms in the U.S. "That represented a net increase of 75,810 farms since our last Census of Agriculture in 2002," he noted.

In addition, Bass said nearly 300,000 new farms have begun operation since the 2002 Ag Census. "Compared to all farms nationwide," he said, "these new farms tend to have more diversified production, fewer acres, lower sales, and younger operators who also work off-farm."

Joe Prusacki, Director of NASS's Statistics Division, said that in the past five years U.S. farm operators have become more demographically diverse.

"Our 2007 Ag Census," he said, "counted nearly 30 percent more women as principal farm operators. The count of Hispan-



Following an introduction by Secretary **Tom Vilsack** (left), First Lady **Michelle Obama** (center) addresses an audience of USDA employees at the Department's Jefferson Auditorium in Washington, DC on February 19. Behind her on the stage are 18 USDA employees, each of whom has at least 38 years of USDA service. "It is important to say 'thank you'," she emphasized, "for the work that you've done, thank you for the work that you're going to do—because we're going to need you working so very hard over the next several years." She also brought with her a seedling—contained in the plant pot on the footstool to her left—which came from the Jackson magnolia tree that sits on the south portico of the White House. "I hope that this seedling brings years of joy and beauty," she said, as she then contributed it to "The People's Garden"—located on the corner of USDA's Whitten Building in Washington, DC—which USDA had officially established one week earlier on February 12.—**PHOTO BY BOB NICHOLS**

ic operators grew by 10 percent, and the counts of American Indian, Asian, and Black farm operators increased as well."

Prusacki also noted that the latest Ag Census figures show a continuation in the trend toward more small and very large farms—but fewer mid-sized operations. "Between 2002 and 2007, the number of farms with sales of less than \$2,500 increased by nearly 74,000, to total over 900,000," he said. "Plus, the number of farms with sales of more than \$500,000 increased by around 46,000, to total over 116,000 by the same period."

Ginger Harris, NASS's Demographer, said that the Ag Census results show that the majority of U.S. farms are smaller operations. "More than 36 percent," she said, "are classified as residential/lifestyle farms, with sales of less than \$250,000 and oper-

ators with a primary occupation other than farming. Plus, another 21 percent are retirement farms, which have sales of less than \$250,000 and operators who reported that they are retired."

Bass noted that some "firsts" in the 2007 Ag Census included more detail on organic production plus questions about on-farm energy generation, community-supported agriculture arrangements, historic barns, and the availability of high-speed Internet access. Complete census results are available at www.agcensus.usda.gov.

"Our Census of Agriculture is a complete count of the nation's farms and ranches and the people who operate them," affirmed Prusacki. "It provides the only source of uniform, comprehensive agricultural data for every county in the nation." ■

—**RON HALL**

Employees *make these things happen*

Marketing and Regulatory Programs

You Can Use This Free Calendar To Keep Those 'Backyard Birds' Healthy

Do you raise poultry or pet birds? Are you a bird enthusiast? Then the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service has a calendar for you. It's titled "2009 Backyard Biosecurity: Keeping Your Birds Healthy."

"This is part of the 'Biosecurity For Birds' campaign run by APHIS's Veterinary Services program," explained **Madelaine Fletcher**, the APHIS Public Affairs Specialist responsible for the 'Biosecurity For Birds' outreach and education campaign. "Our goal is to spread the word about biosecurity and bird health to people raising backyard poultry."

She noted that the 2009 version of the calendar is the fourth year in which APHIS has produced this publication. What's different this year, she pointed out, is that the calendar contains more tips than in previous editions. Such tips include "Keep separate clothes and shoes for working with your birds," "Do not share your bird equipment or tools with neighbors or other bird owners," and "If a bird looks sick, it probably is sick. Have it checked out." Plus, this is the fourth year in a row in which the text of the calendar is printed in English and Spanish on the same page.

"Our primary audience," said **Patrice Klein**, APHIS Senior Staff Veterinarian and Avian Disease Specialist, "is people who are 'non-commercial poultry and bird owners'—that is, those who raise chickens and other poultry to sell or eat or even pet birds. These 'non-commercial' individuals are not routinely subject to APHIS's regulatory authority, although they may be subject to state or local

animal health or public health regulations."

With color photos of a variety of poultry and game birds, the calendar—available for free by ordering from www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/birdbiosecurity—provides a way to raise awareness about infectious avian diseases such as avian influenza and exotic Newcastle disease.

"The easy-to-read tips and information about biosecurity help 'backyard bird owners' learn how to take care of their birds," Klein said. 'Biosecurity measures' are basically hygiene activities which bird owners should practice, such as hand-washing before and after working with their birds, keeping people away from their birds, and keeping new birds separate from older ones for several weeks after having obtained the new birds.

APHIS Senior Staff Veterinarian **Fidelis Hegngi** said that the 'Biosecurity for Birds' education campaign began in 2004 in response to the exotic Newcastle disease outbreak in 2002-03 in California and other Western states. "That was the largest animal disease outbreak in the U.S. in 30 years," he said. "It took 11 months to eradicate, and it cost state and federal governments more than \$160 million in eradication efforts."

"A majority of the nearly four million birds that had to be killed came from commercial operations," Hegngi recounted. "But many also came from non-commercial backyard flocks and bird enthusiasts."

"That's when we knew we needed to reach backyard poultry and bird owners with a Prevention message."

Hegngi noted that the calendar is one of several approaches that APHIS uses to reach

backyard poultry owners to educate them about how to keep their birds healthy and safe. Other initiatives include working with FFA and 4-H to promote the information at county fairs and poultry shows, and paying for 'prevention messages' on feedsacks. "For instance," he said, "a typical message, on a 50-pound paper sack containing poultry feed, may read 'Prevent Avian Diseases'—and then it details how to do that."

Fletcher said that APHIS distributed over 100,000 copies of the 2008 version of its calendar. "Our 2009 version has been available since November, and so far we've already distributed over 60,000."

"The calendar is useful all year long. So, from an education perspective, it doesn't get much better than that." ■

—HEATHER CURLETT



"You know, we've already distributed over 60,000 of our calendars since November!" notes APHIS's **Madelaine Fletcher** (right), as she reviews the 2009 version of the agency's 'Backyard Biosecurity' calendar with APHIS's **Fidelis Hegngi** (left) and **Patrice Klein**. —PHOTO BY ANSON EAGLIN

Research, Education, and Economics

Making Valentine's Day Special For Military Overseas—And Their Kids

Valentine's Day has, of course, come and gone. But a whole lot of military personnel deployed overseas are no doubt still thinking about that day.

That's because staffers with the Louisiana State University AgCenter helped to make sure that those military personnel—and their children too—received Valentine's Day cards from kids living back stateside.

Katie Schexnayder, a 4-H Youth Development

Extension Associate based in the LSU AgCenter's State 4-H office in Baton Rouge, is in charge of the "Operation: Military Kids" program for the state of Louisiana. A portion of the funding for her activities comes from the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service.

She explained that "Operation: Military Kids" is a nationwide program through USDA and the U.S. Army. "The nationwide program started five years ago," she explained, "with the goal of educating the public about the

unique stress facing military children—especially those who are not living on military installations."

The program is designed to create community support networks for military youth when their parents or guardians are deployed in the Army or Air National Guards or the Army, Navy, or Air Force Reserves.

"These children are often referred to as 'geographically dispersed'," Schexnayder pointed out. "This normally means they have

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Editor's Roundup *USDA's people in the news*



John Norris is the Chief of Staff for Secretary **Tom Vilsack**.

Before joining USDA, from 2005 until his appointment to this position Norris served as Chairman of the Iowa Utilities Board, based in Des Moines. From 2003-04 he worked for the Presidential Campaign of Sen. **John Kerry** (D-MA) as his Iowa State Director, and then served as National Field Director for the Kerry-Edwards Campaign.

Norris served as Chief of Staff for [then] Iowa Governor Vilsack from 1999-2001. He served as State Chairman of the Iowa Democratic Party in 1998. From 1997-98 he was Chief of Staff to Rep. **Leonard Boswell** (D-IA). He owned a restaurant in Greenfield, IA from 1989-92. From 1986-89 he served as State Director of the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition.

Dale Moore, who served as the previous Chief of Staff to [then] Secretaries **Ann Veneman**, **Mike Johanns**, and then **Ed Schafer** from 2001-09, is temporarily serving as a Special Assistant to the USDA Transition Team to provide the Team with a historical, administrative, and technical perspective. ■



Carole Jett is the Deputy Chief of Staff for Secretary **Tom Vilsack**.

Before rejoining USDA, from November 2008 until her appointment to this position Jett served as Co-Lead of the President's Transition Team USDA Agency Review Group. She worked on the Obama Agriculture Campaign Team in Indiana during 2008.

Jett was a full-time career employee of the Natural Resources Conservation Service from 1975 until she retired in June 2008. During her career with NRCS she served as Farm Bill Coordinator for the agency for the 2008 Farm Bill. She also led the NRCS 2002 Farm Bill implementation effort. In 1999 she served on assignment with the Agriculture Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives, as part of her Senior Executive Service Candidate Development Program. She served as the NRCS State Conservationist for Michigan, based in East Lansing, from 1993-96, and was the agency's State Soil Scientist for California, based in Davis, from 1988-90. She began her federal career with the agency as a Soil Scientist in Reno, NV in 1975.

Jett succeeded **Jennifer Cervantes**, who

served as the Deputy Chief of Staff to [then] Secretary **Ed Schafer**. ■



Jessica Shahin is the Associate Administrator for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in the Food and Nutrition Service.

For much of the period from January 2004 until her selection for this position Shahin served simultaneously as Acting Associate Administrator and Deputy Assistant Administrator for FNS's [then] Food Stamp Program. The 2008 farm bill changed the name of the Food Stamp Program to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, effective Oct. 1, 2008. She served from 2001-04 as the Confidential Assistant to the Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services.

From 1997-2001 Shahin was based in Austin, TX as Director of Interagency Policy with the Texas Department of Human Services. She was Executive Assistant to the Deputy Commissioner for Client Self-Support Programs in the Texas Department of Human Services from 1996-97. From 1994-96 she

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a parent or parents in the National Guard or Reserves, and the children are living off base or off post and are somewhat separated from kids of full-time active duty personnel who are having similar experiences."

Louisiana 4-H Military Liaison **Tanya Walker** noted that some Louisiana service personnel have been deployed three or four times—requiring them to be away from their families literally for years.

"We have 18,000 military children in Louisiana," she underscored. "We're trying to reach out to each of them to let them know that they're not alone and that they are part of the community—and that we're here to support them with what they need."

Accordingly, Schexnayder worked with **Susan Thornton**, a Specialist in a local public program called "I Care," who in turn worked with students in several elementary schools in East Baton Rouge. "Susan encouraged the kids to make homemade Valentine's Day cards," she recounted. "Then on February 9 we collected those cards—about 300 of them. Then we started shipping them to

our Louisiana National Guard and Louisiana Reserve troops stationed overseas, mostly in Iraq and Afghanistan—as well as to the children of those military deployed personnel."

She added that her office completed shipping out all 300 cards on February 20.

ReAzalia Allen, an LSU Student Representative of the LSU 4-H Collegiate Organization and an LSU AgCenter Student Worker, pointed out that some of the students created Valentine's Day cards specifically for other students, while others made cards for the military personnel. "So," she affirmed, "we sorted those out and made sure that each respective group—students or adults—got the appropriate cards."

"Hey," Schexnayder underscored, "I want to emphasize that 'Operation: Military Kids' is a nationwide program. So I want to give a shout-out to all USDA employees across the country to get involved in their local communities, to find out specific actions they can undertake to provide assistance—not only their local military Guard or Reserve personnel deployed overseas but also to the kids of

those personnel back here stateside."

"Valentine's Day was a successful initiative along those lines. Next up: Memorial Day?" ■

—**JOHNNY MORGAN**



"This particular card reads 'Hurry Home Soon!'" notes LSU AgCenter's **Katie Schexnayder** (2nd from left). She is reviewing—with LSU AgCenter staffers **Stephanie Fernandez-Hill** (left) and **Tanya Walker** (seated, right), plus LSU Student **ReAzalia Allen** (standing)—some of the many Valentine's Day cards that her office is shipping out to Louisiana National Guard and Louisiana Reserve troops stationed overseas—as well as to the children of those military deployed personnel.—**PHOTO BY KIM JONES**

served as that Department's Director of Information Management for the State's Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) Project. In that position she was on the original Texas EBT Team, which helped to move Texas away from traditional paper food stamps and toward plastic debit cards, which participants in the [then] Food Stamp Program in Texas would use to purchase food at participating retail stores. She also taught public policy from 1997-2001 as an Adjunct Professor at the University of Texas in Austin. From 1990-93 she worked as a Case Manager at a physical rehabilitation hospital in Dallas.

Clarence Carter, the previous [then] Deputy Administrator for FNS's [then] Food Stamp Program, is now the Director of the Department of Human Services for the District of Columbia. ■



At last count there are about 112,800 USDA employees located across the country and around the world. A lot of them work in locations—especially in urban areas—which make it worthwhile for groups of employees to commute to work together by carpool, vanpool, and chartered buses.

But several Agricultural Research Service employees in Bushland, TX may be the first to have taken that concept one step further. They formed a partnership, pooled their money together, and bought their own used bus—and that's what they've been using to get to the office ever since.

Don McRoberts, a Biological Science Technician with ARS's Conservation and Production Research Laboratory in Bushland,

explained that he'd been talking with some fellow ARS employees "about, you know, the high cost of gas, the drag of the daily commute—the standard grouching that people do." Then he mentioned to the group that he had seen a small used bus for sale.

"That got us to brainstorming," McRoberts recounted. And the next thing they knew, four ARS employees at the Lab—plus two individuals who work at the Texas Agrilife Research Services facility located nearby—had agreed to form a legal partnership—complete with official documents that all six of them signed and notarized. That partnership is titled "Bushland Express."

McRoberts said that he had volunteered to make the purchase of that used bus. "It's a 1989 Ford which is colored white with blue and red stripes—which came with the bus—
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PROFILE PLUS More About: Mary Alvarez



Mary Alvarez is an Animal Health Program Assistant with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's Cattle Fever Tick Eradication Office in Brownsville, TX. She assists the APHIS "tick riders" who work the U.S. side of the Texas-Mexico border, as they attempt to control the fever tick population along the southern tip of Texas by spraying horses and dipping cattle with pesticide. "They're riding the range outdoors," she explained. "But, when they ultimately need to take care of the various reports to document their activities, that's where I come in."

In fact, Alvarez has been working at that job since 1976. But 32-plus years don't even paint the whole picture, when compared to the fact that she's been a federal employee almost continually since late World War II. In fact, since her federal service computation date is April 1948, she has over 60 years of federal service. Therefore, Alvarez is thought to be the USDA employee with the most years of full-time federal service who is still employed full-time at the Department. **Calvin Beale**, who was a Senior Demographer with the Economic Research Service in Washington, DC, previously held that distinction until he passed away from colon cancer, while on Sick Leave status, in September 2008. Beale was 85.

Alvarez, who is 87, was born on July 24, 1921 in San Benito, TX. She graduated from her local high school in 1939 and then worked some odd jobs for a number of years while living at home. "I was the second eldest of nine siblings," she noted. "There weren't many jobs in San Benito, and my family needed me to help out at home." But then **Uncle Sam** came calling, looking for people to come to Washington, DC to work for the federal government. It was 1944. "I'd been attending Durham Business College in Harlingen, Texas—the school isn't even there any more," she recounted. "These officials came to the school, asking for typists to come to Washington, DC and work for the military." She passed the typing test, and then, one week later, was mailed a train ticket—to head east.

First time out of the state? "First time out of the house!" she quipped. Alvarez lived with several women in a barracks-like facil-

ity in Arlington, VA, while working in a munitions building in Washington, DC—until moving to the just-completed Pentagon. She stayed for 15 months, got homesick and moved back to Texas, found no jobs there so moved back to DC, and was re-employed as a clerk typist in the Pentagon until 1950. She then moved back to San Benito where she clerked for the U.S. Department of Labor until taking a position as a clerk typist with the just-reopened Harlingen AFB in southern Texas. She worked there from 1952-62 when she took a position as a secretary with the U.S. Selective Service in San Benito from 1963-74. "That was during the Vietnam War," she recounted. "Officials kept coming through, looking through our files, trying to find young men who were classified '1-A'—eligible for military service." She moved to her current position with APHIS in 1976.

When asked for anecdotes from her USDA career, Alvarez related the time when a tick rider had an accident with his horse—because the horse fell on him. "I used to keep tabs on the riders using a two-way radio. This was 1979, and cellphones didn't exist back then," she explained. "The rider was a little fellow and the horse must have weighed 1,000 pounds. So I asked him 'What kind of help do you need?' 'Human help!' he replied. So I was able to figure out his approximate location, and then I coordinated getting 'human help' out there, to literally pull the horse off of him. I'm happy to say that his injuries were relatively minor—in spite of having that horse on top of him for about 45 minutes."

Last Book Read: "I used to belong to a local book club. But now I have glaucoma, so I'm not able to read as much as I used to."

Last Movie Seen: "I haven't been to a movie in years. I figure I'm sitting in my office all day long, so why then go and sit in a movie theater? I'd rather go dancing."

Hobbies: "I like growing plants at home."

Something I Don't Want People To Know About Me: "I've been a diabetic for about a year, so I'm supposed to check myself by drawing blood with a needle twice a day. But I *hate* pricking my finger—so I'm not doing that as often as I'm supposed to. But I don't want people to know that—especially my doctor."

Priorities In The Months Ahead: "Paperwork here at the office, I take care of right away. But paperwork at home, like junk mail I get, keeps building up in piles. I actually have two shredders at home, so I need to start using 'em. Soon." ■

—RON HALL



"Joe, I know you and I like the fact that, for the first time, we used NASS's web-based system to help farmers and ranchers report their ag census info to us—and nearly 97,000 of them did so," affirms NASS's **Bob Bass** (left), as he and NASS's **Joe Prusacki** underscore some of the procedures used during the 2007 Census of Agriculture. Note the story on page 3.—**PHOTO BY RENEE ALLEN**

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rent program has improved the day-to-day operations of those functions and has been able to capitalize on available resources under one organization."

How can you tell that the reorganization is working? Sheehan advised that it's largely "gut" at this point.

"However," he said, "first, I think the comments of our customers are a strong hint. Second, support from agency managers is another good sign. Third, our e-mail service evaluations show a high regard for the services received. Fourth, scientists throughout USDA like getting their ethics advice from one office staffed with people who know *their* world and issues. Fifth, I think people see a heightened level of service and knowledge. Sixth, the U.S. Office of Government Ethics has been quite favorable toward our efforts, based largely upon what we've been doing organizationally. Finally, other federal departments and agencies have contacted us to explore doing the same. Does that answer your question?"

Sheehan added that the new Administra-

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and it can hold up to 15 passengers," he noted. "So last May I went to a Chevrolet dealer, located about 10 miles away in Amarillo, to start the negotiation. I offered them \$750. The salesperson counter-offered with \$800, to include tax, title, and license. I said 'Buddy, you've got a deal'."

The employees put the purchase in the name of the partnership.

And then they were ready to change their commuting patterns, right? "No, the bus gremlins wanted to challenge us a little, first," McRoberts quipped. ARS Biological Science Technician **Ed Hutcherson** pointed out that, before the bus was ready to safely roll out onto the highway, the partnership first had to invest about \$1,400 in its upkeep. This included four new tires for \$400, four new safety windows for \$250, and new gears in the rear end of the bus for \$750.

Who does the driving? "Normally Don and I," said ARS Biological Science Technician **Grant Johnson**. "I generally do the driving except when I need Don to fill in for me."

Did the drivers have to get a special bus permit, or a bus driver's license, and does it

affect their auto insurance premium? "No, as long as we don't exceed 20 passengers in the bus," Johnson replied.

Does the bus drive through local neighborhoods to pick up the participants in this venture? "No, we all congregate in the parking lot of a local supermarket, and then board the bus at about 7:20 every morning," explained ARS Biological Science Technician **Jennifer Childers**, who is a rider but not part of the partnership. "It's about a 25-mile, 30-minute ride from there to our ARS lab."

Who has the honor of having the bus parked in front of their residence overnight? "Nobody! That bus is so ugly, nobody wanted it in front of their house—I mean, think of the property values!" McRoberts laughed.

ARS Maintenance and Repair Specialist **Lloyd Banghart** then explained that the owners of the local supermarket where they meet have graciously consented to allow the bus to park in a side lot overnight.

And how's the venture going so far? "It's costing us all about \$10 per day—total—to commute, using our bus," McRoberts noted. "So I think it's working pretty good!" ■

—**RON HALL**

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al infrastructure throughout the state.

In addition to serving on the National Governors Association Executive Committee, he also served as Chair of the Governors Ethanol Coalition, Chair of the Democratic Governors Association, founding member and Chair of the Governors Biotechnology Partnership, and Chair of the National Governors Association Committee on Natural Resources.

Natural Resources Conservation Service Historian **Douglas Helms** noted that Vilsack is the fifth USDA Secretary from Iowa. Previ-

ous Secretaries from the Hawkeye State include **Henry Agard Wallace**, who served from 1933-40; Wallace's father **Henry Cantwell Wallace**, who served from 1921-24; **Edwin Meredith**, who served from 1920-21; and **James Wilson**, the fourth Secretary, who served from 1897-1913.

A more complete biography and a video of Vilsack's remarks to USDA employees on January 22 are both available at **www.usda.gov**. ■

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Ron Hall	Editor
Charles Hobbs	USDA NEWS Internet Coordinator
Kirk Spencer	Printing Foreman
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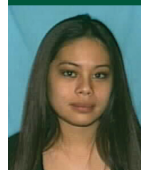
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*"Do you want to handle the morning commute today, and I'll take care of the evening round?" asks ARS's **Don McRoberts** (center), as he finalizes, with ARS's **Grant Johnson** (sitting, right) and ARS's **Jennifer Childers**, their 25-mile commute to the agency's Conservation and Production Research Laboratory in Bushland, TX. Sure, lots of USDA employees around the country commute to work together by carpool, vanpool, and chartered buses. But this may be the first time that USDA employees have formed a legal partnership, pooled their money together, and bought their own used bus to employ in their trek to and from the office. Note the story on page 6.—**PHOTO BY BETH HOLT***



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